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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, the American family has been stripped of two of its traditional social functions: serving as a unit for economic production and as a school for the vocational training of children. The first function has been usurped by commercial firms, the second by the state. Some functions remain: physically and emotionally gratifying the family's adult members, socializing the family's children into community mores, and promoting the children's development. Four social policy initiatives will increase the likelihood that children will thrive in today's family environments: (1) protecting young mothers and their children against poverty; (2) providing paid parental leave after childbirth; (3) assuring access to quality day care; and (4) educating students for parenthood in the public schools. Taken together, these elements of a comprehensive national policy on child development can make a significant contribution to the future of the nation's children. (RH)

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WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE AMERICAN FAMILY?

by

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Few issues vex Americans more than what has happened to the role of the family in caring for children. And for good reason. Almost one in four of the nation's 62 youngsters under 18 lives with only one parent, almost always the mother. And if the youngster is Black, the ratio rises to one in two.

How has that come about? For one thing, the divorce ratio has tripled and the percentage of out-of-wedlock births among teenaged women has doubled over the past 15 years. With the percentage of teenagers engaging in premarital intercourse having increased by half during the '70's and few receiving instruction about contraception at home or at school, high birth rates became inevitable. Sadly enough, the United States now enjoys a dubious distinction among industrialized countries. Despite having the highest teenage abortion rate, we head the list for teenage birth rate because the pregnancy rate among teenagers is so high!

Caring for infants is not just a dilemma for female-headed households. Whether or not the family is intact, half of all mothers with a preschool child are in the labor force, 50% more than the proportion employed out of the home a decade ago. And that's not the end of it. The Labor Department reports that the number of women holding two or more jobs has increased five-fold since 1970 and now is 80% of the rate (about 6%) for multiple job holding among men. The way infants and children are cared for in America has changed profoundly within one generation.

Whether it is true or not, many Americans believe that these changes in family life are probably the cause of the major social

ills that beset us: crime in the streets, drug use, poor school achievement, even AIDS. What we need, we hear on all sides, is a return to the good old days when parents were responsible for their kids and kids obeyed their parents. What we need, the same people say, is that old-time family.

You remember the one we met in our elementary school readers: Father and Mother and Jane and Dick and Spot. Father went off to work, but he always had time for the children; Mother stayed home, contentedly cooking nutritious meals, keeping the house and garden immaculate and loving Dick, Jane and Spot (and perhaps Father as well; my first grade reader was silent on the point). Life was so simple that short declarative and imperative sentences sufficed:

"Mother cooks dinner. Jane helps Mother. Look Jane! Watch Dick play ball. See Spot run."

True, we suspected all families weren't quite like that, but that's the way they were supposed to be. Families like that, many believe, were what made America great. What ever happened to that family?

All of them, of course, are much older now. Dick and Jane have their own families. Although Dick's second marriage is less troubled than his first, both he and his new wife Carol have to work hard to meet the mortgage payments on their condominium. Carol does her best when her step-children visit but she can't help resenting it when they are not very nice to the new baby. Dick isn't much help because he feels guilty for having left his

first set of children. During the week, little Di (they named her after the Princess) cries when she's dropped off at the day care center. That worries them, but Carol does have to be at work on time.

Jane grew up to be much like Mother. Homemaking was career enough for her. A fan of Phyllis Schafly's, she believed gourmet cooking and filmy lingerie would keep her man happy. It was all the more of a shock when Bob ran off with a younger woman and wouldn't pay child support for Jason and Rebecca. With no work skills and no experience, Jane lives on AFDC. Jason worries her because he doesn't do his school work and hangs out with a rough crowd. Becca won't listen when Jane tells her 12 is too young for lipstick and dating. Jane always tried to do the right thing. She can't understand what happened to her. She feels like crying all the time.

If you wonder about Spot, at least he accomplished something before his demise. He was given a medal by the local animal rights society for biting a scientist!

And Father? He hasn't been the same since he lost his job when his firm was acquired in a hostile takeover. At 60, he hasn't been able to find another job. He mopes around the house.

Mother tries to cheer up Father and helps Jane out when she can. It all seems so unjust. She stayed home, cooked and cleaned, and went to church; yet everything has gone wrong.

What distresses Mother and Father and Dick and Jane distresses a good many others. The norms of decent behavior seem

to be disintegrating on all sides. There is a sense of having lost control over our lives. We long for a return to a Golden Age, a time when fundamental values were shared by all. If there was a Golden Age, can we go back to it? No one doubts that today's family is harassed and overburdened. The question is: could what seemed to work then work now?

Consider the Puritan family. It raised its own food, made most of its own clothing and furniture, taught its children to read, to worship their God, and to care for each other in sickness and in old age. The Puritans described the family as

> "a school wherein the first principles and grounds of government and subjection are learned; whereby men are fitted to greater matters in church and Commonwealth."

The father exercised authority over his wife and children much as the king ruled his subjects and God the father ruled over nations. The result was a community of law and order.

What principles guided Puritan parents in rearing children? According to the Reverend Benjamin Wadsworth:

> "[A]s sharers in the guilt of Adam's first sin, [children] are...liable to eternal vengeance [and] the unquenchable flames of hell."

How were children to be saved? Cotton Mather's terse formula distilled the message into four words: "Better whipt than damned."

And the role of women? Governor Winthrop admonished Puritan wives to avoid the deplorable fate of the wife of Governor Hopkins of Connecticut. Mistress Hopkins, he wrote, became insane because she spent too much time in reading and writing:

> "[I]f she had attended her household affairs, and such things as belonged to women, and not gone out of her way and calling to meddle in things as are proper for men, whose minds are stronger, she had kept her wits, and might have improved them usefully and honorably in the place God had set her."

Even Mother and Jane might balk at Governor Winthrop's prescription for the improvement of women's wits. But that is really beside the point. For better or for worse, the conditions that made the Puritan family what it was are long gone. In the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, the American family has been stripped of two of its traditional social functions: serving as a unit for economic production and as a school for the vocational training of its children. The first has been usurped by commercial firms, the second by the state. Two functions remain: first, the physical and emotional gratification of its adult members and second, socializing its children into community mores and promoting their development. Before asking how well it is fulfilling the last role, let me briefly recapitulate the profound changes in the modern family:

The family was once an interdependent economic unit to which all members contributed. It produced most of the goods it consumed. As households began to specialize in cash crops, household self-sufficiency declined. Cottage industries were eliminated as more and more goods were produced in factories. Parental authority was no longer reinforced by control over property inheritance and the acquisition of craft skills. Children ceased being economic assets as they had been on the farm; they now required substantial outlays for their upbringing.

Women's roles have been transformed. The rate of change has accelerated in the last few decades. There has been a remarkable increase in female participation in the labor force. Both marriage partners need to bring in income to meet family bills. Although women are less financially dependent on their husbands, they continue to bear the major burden of household and child care chores whether they work or not.

At the turn of the century, when female life expectancy was about 48 years and total fertility 4, women spent virtually all of their adult lives in bearing and then rearing children. With female life expectancy longer by 30 years and with fertility now complete at less than 2, women today have 30 to 40 years of post-reproductive life; most experience widowhood. Given these facts, it is evident how badly Jane was misled by Phyllis Schafly.

There has been a marked reduction in the salience of the family. Since 1960, the proportion of women not marrying has doubled; the probability of divorce has risen to 50%. Rates of

child bearing have declined steadily over the past two centuries, from a total fertility rate of 7 in 1800 to 1.8 today. There was one interruption: the post World War II baby boom, when fertility rates rose by 50%. By the mid-1950's, the long term decline reasserted itself so completely that U.S. birth rates fell below the replacement level in 1975 and have remained well under it since.

In the modal American family of the 1980's, both parents are not only at work but at work outside the home. This has major consequences for family life, consequences captured by the phrase: "time poverty." The economist Victor Fuchs has calculated that, between 1960 and 1986, the opportunity to spend time with parents declined by 10 hours per week for the average white child and by 12 hours per week for black children. The principal reason is the increase in the proportion of mothers holding paid jobs; not far behind is the increase in one parent households. In theory, fathers in intact families could offset the loss in hours of mothering by more fathering; there is little evidence that they do so.

Twenty-one percent of American children now grow up in poverty; if we focus on children living in young families (that is, with parents under 30), the percentage rises to 35%. These data reflect two factors: the decline in real dollar incomes for young families and the growing percentage of single parent families. The average family income of the poorest one-fifth of American families declined by 10% -- and that of the poorest

fifth of black families by 20% -- between 1979 and 1987, the very period when family income for the top fifth grew by 16%. The news is even grimmer for young single parent families; three-quarters of the children in such families live in poverty.

What conclusions can we draw about child care in today's family environments? What social policies will increase the likelihood that our children will thrive? I believe we need four policy initiatives: protection of young mothers and their children against poverty; paid parental leave after childbirth; assured access to quality day care; and education for parenthood in the public schools.

The first policy need is for measures to protect young mothers and their children against poverty. It is not single parenthood alone, but the poverty associated with it that accounts for much of the pathology seen in the children in such families. Contrast the situation in the United States with that in Sweden. In the U.S., the typical public assistance grant provides an income well below the poverty line, intended, presumably as a "spur" to work; yet it locks mothers on "welfare" into a cycle of dependency because the earnings from the part-time low-paid work available to them are confiscated. It offers nothing to parents who keep just above the poverty line. Health care coverage is variable and uncertain, as though our nation believes that children of indigent parents do not deserve health care. Under current rules, Medicaid covers half of them at best.

By contrast, in Sweden, payments to single mothers provide a modestly decent standard of living in conjunction with day care, subsidized housing and health insurance. Swedish policy is designed to support high female labor force participation rates by continuing benefits at a generous level when women return to work. The married mother with a working husband remains far better off financially; what government policy does is to avert destitution for single mothers. Family benefits do not solve the problem of "time poverty" or end loneliness. They do prevent the superimposition of poverty onto other life stresses. That must become the minimum goal of policy in the U.S. The time is long overdue for a higher federal minimum wage and for extending the Earned Income Tax Credit for working families with children.

Second, federal legislation should mandate at least three months and preferably up to six months of paid leave with guaranteed job protection for either mother or father after the birth of an infant. It is an indictment of our society that ours is the only Western industrialized country without such provisions. Regrettably, two months ago, President Bush vetoed an unpaid leave bill and the House of Representatives failed to overturn that veto. Even were parental leave available, not all mothers would wish to utilize it; the important thing is to have options. When there is a father and he prefers to be the one to stay home with the baby, that is an equally welcome alternative.

The third element in a comprehensive child care policy is assured access to quality infant and child day care. That

demands two things: federal standards mandating quality care, and federal subsidies. Infant day care of good quality is simply unaffordable even for young mothers earning the average full-time wage for their age group. Prudent concern for the defense of our national interests is sufficient justification for a graduated system of subsidy indexed to family income for the expenses incurred in approved day care centers. To enlarge the pool of individuals qualified to work in such centers, education in child development must be much expanded and student scholarships made available.

The fourth element in a comprehensive policy is education for parenthood. To some, that will sound absurd. I can imagine what Mother would say: "parents have <u>always</u> raised their children without help from the experts. No, thank you!" Indeed they have and, by and large, well. But they had the opportunity to learn by modeling themselves not only on their parents, but on uncles and aunts and grandparents, at home or nearby. More than that, as they grew up, they learned how to care for younger brothers and sisters because they were expected to. The isolated nuclear family and the sharp sequestration of age groups in today's society combine to deprive today's children of that experience. Twenty-five years ago, one in five families had at least three children; today, that is true for less than one in ten. The "average" family has gone from 1.6 to 1.2 children.

Under such circumstances, new social inventions are required to guarantee the acquisition of competence in parenting.

I propose that child development centers be housed on junior high and high school campuses in order for male and female adolescents to care for young children, to learn about child development, and to prepare themselves for later parenthood. Classroom exercises would parallel practical experiences in child care. The purpose is not to provide child care on the cheap. The work the students do should be closely supervised. However, their contribution to care should offset the cost of their supervision.

Taken together, these elements of a comprehensive national policy on child development can make a significant contribution to the future of our children. Some will insist that we cannot afford new and costly federal initiatives. Let us instead ask: can we afford not to? The Committee for Economic Development, representing some 200 business executives and educators, answered with these words:

"If the nation defers the expense of preventive programs during the formative years, it will incur much higher and more intractable costs for older children that have already experienced failure."

Will these policies bring about a Golden Age of the Family? Clearly not. The most they can do is to cushion children against poverty. As society continues to evolve, so will the family. As the family changes, we will need to monitor the state of our children, for they are our future.